

EU Engagement in Afghanistan: Balancing Aid and Human Rights

11 SEPTEMBER 2026

Elina Vessere Arnese



Photo by Sohaib Ghyasi on Unsplash

On 15 August 2026, five years had passed since the Taliban captured the capital city of Kabul. Since then, the Taliban has consolidated territorial control and established itself as the de facto authority in the country. Five years later, Afghanistan is experiencing one of the largest humanitarian crises, while the international community is trying to engage with the de facto authorities to provide humanitarian aid, but at the same time is responding to their systematic abuse of human rights, particularly those of women and girls.

After more than four decades of conflict, Afghanistan is now facing one of the largest humanitarian crises in the world. Despite a few years of economic growth, an estimated three in four Afghans are still unable to meet basic needs (UNDP, 2026). More than 3.7 million children under the age of five are expected to face acute malnutrition, while 13.78 million people are projected to experience acute food insecurity in 2026 (ECHO, 2026). To address the crisis, the international community, including the European

Union, is actively providing humanitarian funding and aid. However, the provision of humanitarian aid is taking place in an environment controlled by the Taliban, which continues to impose restrictions on women's rights and suppress freedoms, making the working environment for humanitarian actors extremely difficult. This creates a structural challenge for the European Union: how to continue effectively providing humanitarian assistance while simultaneously upholding its commitment to human rights and not inadvertently recognising the Taliban's rule. As a result, the effectiveness of the EU-funded humanitarian aid increasingly depends on the ability of humanitarian organisations to negotiate operational access with the de facto authorities, while remaining independent from them. This brief argues that the EU should maintain its policy of non-recognition while developing more structured humanitarian access arrangements and decentralised monitoring mechanisms to preserve humanitarian access without conferring political legitimacy on the de facto authorities.

Humanitarian Crisis and Human Rights Under Taliban Rule

The humanitarian crisis has severe consequences for the population. Afghanistan's maternal mortality ratio, approximately 638 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births, is one of the highest worldwide (OCHA, 2026). Malnutrition and limited healthcare disproportionately affect women and children in the country, who in turn become even more vulnerable to restrictions imposed by the Taliban. Prolonged droughts amplify existing humanitarian vulnerabilities, contributing to rising food prices, malnutrition, and displacement. In 2023, food insecurity partially improved due to humanitarian efforts, but Afghanistan experienced its third consecutive drought year, which began in 2021. Droughts continue in 2026, with particular vulnerability expected in provinces of Faryab, Ghor, and Daykundi (ReliefWeb, n.d.).

At the same time, the Taliban continues to impose extensive restrictions on some of the most vulnerable parts of Afghan society: women and children. The United Nations reports that over the past five years, the Taliban has issued more than 100 decrees targeting women and girls, systematically excluding them from education, public life, healthcare, the justice system, and employment. Girls are banned from attending secondary and high school beyond Grade 6, while women are banned from studying at universities. These restrictions directly contribute to the underrepresentation of women in all fields, including healthcare. Women's freedom of movement is restricted because they cannot access public spaces freely. In 2026, Decree No. 12 formally removed legal equality between men and women, giving husbands legal authority over their wives. The decree limits the criminalisation of violence within marriage to cases resulting in visible physical injuries, leaving psychological and sexual violence unpunished (UN Women, 2026a). Decree No. 18 removes the official age requirements for marriage, tying eligibility to physical maturity rather

than a specific age, legitimising child marriage (UN Women, 2026b). The restrictions, therefore, create a dilemma for the European Union: withdrawing humanitarian assistance could worsen the existing crisis, while engaging with the Taliban regime creates a risk of normalising a system that systematically violates human rights.

This systemic violation was not left unnoticed by the international community. On 8 July 2025, the International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants for Hibatullah Akhundzada, the supreme leader of the Taliban, and Abdul Hakim Haqqani, Chief Justice of the Taliban, on charges of crimes against humanity (ICC, 2025a). For the European Union, these arrest warrants further increase the political and diplomatic costs of any normalisation and reaffirm the need to protect vulnerable populations through alternative channels.

The European Union's Approach to Afghanistan

In this environment, the European Union has sought to balance the continuous provision of humanitarian aid with its commitment to human rights and non-recognition. Since 2021, the European Union has provided over €2 billion in assistance to Afghanistan. The assistance was provided to address food shortages, healthcare, education, shelter, climate resilience, and women's empowerment. The EU does not recognise the Taliban-run de facto authorities, but maintains operational communication with them to discuss technical issues and to promote the EU's core values, including the importance of protecting human rights. To facilitate such contact, the EU even maintains a diplomatic representation in Kabul at the Chargé d'Affaires level. However, the EU does not use its operational contact with Taliban-run institutions to deliver humanitarian aid. EU aid is provided through the Red Cross, NGOs, UN agencies and the World Bank Group. A move towards possible recognition would require Afghanistan to respect international obligations and human rights, prevent the use of its territory by terrorist groups, and establish an inclusive and representative government (EEAS, 2026).

Five main objectives guide the EU's engagement with Afghanistan. These include ensuring that humanitarian assistance can be delivered in accordance with international humanitarian law and the principles of humanity, impartiality and independence; promoting and protecting human rights, particularly the rights of women and children; supporting the establishment of an inclusive and representative government; preventing Afghan territory from being used by terrorist groups; and ensuring the safe and orderly departure of foreign nationals and Afghans wishing to leave the country (EEAS, 2026). These objectives demonstrate the EU's efforts to address the challenges without formally recognising the de facto regime.

Humanitarian Access and the Limits of Engagement

However, implementing these objectives is complicated by the Taliban's restrictions on humanitarian organisations. In 2022, the de facto authorities banned women from being employed at domestic and international NGOs, stating that NGOs employing women would have their license revoked. Although Afghan women and girls continue to receive humanitarian assistance, restrictions on female NGO workers create additional challenges in delivering aid (UN News, 2024). This makes it difficult for humanitarian organisations to communicate with Afghan women directly, assess their needs, and provide gender-specific services. Social and gender-related restrictions limit direct interaction with male humanitarian workers and female beneficiaries, making it more challenging for humanitarian organisations to assess needs and ensure that the humanitarian aid reaches those most in need. For the European Union, this creates practical challenges, as it must ensure that the humanitarian aid it provides reaches the population and does so under the conditions established by the de facto authorities.

The restrictions imposed by the de facto authorities require humanitarian organisations to communicate with the Taliban on practical matters (EEAS, 2026). For the EU, this means that continued engagement with the Taliban remains necessary, as it controls territorial and administrative matters in Afghanistan and is an unavoidable interlocutor for issues affecting the operational environment for the delivery of humanitarian aid and humanitarian access. However, limited operational communication on specific matters does not mean political recognition. Maintaining limited engagement with the de facto authorities is important for the EU, as it allows it to address humanitarian concerns without compromising its stance on the importance of protecting human rights. At the same time, this creates a division between politically recognising and legitimising the de facto regime and engaging with the de facto authorities as actors maintaining control over Afghanistan. The challenge, therefore, is not whether the EU should have any contact with the Taliban, but how to keep this communication sufficiently limited to issue-specific topics to continue providing humanitarian aid without weakening the EU's broader stance on human rights and its non-recognition policy.

Towards a Structured Humanitarian Access Framework

Currently, the EU avoids direct financial involvement with the Taliban by channelling the aid through alternative pathways, such as NGOs. This raises an important question: 'If the EU already separates humanitarian aid financially and institutionally from the Taliban, how can it preserve humanitarian access in a situation where aid organisations work in the conditions set by the Taliban?' A possible approach to ensure that aid is distributed effectively is to establish clearly defined humanitarian access arrangements with the de facto authorities, rather than addressing spe-

cific restrictions. The possible points in the arrangements could address the movement of humanitarian personnel to affected areas, the employment of female staff, and direct communication with aid beneficiaries. These arrangements would further help the EU maintain topic-specific operational contact with the Taliban authorities while simultaneously seeking specific organisational guarantees that would facilitate the delivery and distribution of humanitarian aid. However, they would require a delicate diplomatic balancing act, as it is important to avoid treating such arrangements as formal bilateral treaties, to prevent providing the Taliban administration with political legitimacy.

Nevertheless, this approach has a significant limitation, as its success would depend almost entirely on the willingness of the de facto authorities to allow its implementation. Hibatullah Akhundzada, the Taliban's Supreme Leader, remains the movement's highest authority and resides in Kandahar (ICC, 2025b). However, regional implementation of decrees may vary, potentially leading to different interpretations at the provincial level. Thus, communicating directly with the de facto authorities might lead to uneven results across provinces. Consequently, a decentralised monitoring mechanism could complement humanitarian access arrangements by identifying implementation gaps and assessing whether agreed access conditions are being respected equally across provinces. Such an approach could involve further empowering civil society and strengthening reporting networks among NGOs to continuously monitor whether the agreed-upon access terms are being honoured equally across provinces.

Conclusion

To conclude, five years after the return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan, the European Union's efforts remain strongly constrained by the operational environment controlled by the decrees of the de facto authorities. This environment is characterised by constant friction: how to maintain the provision of humanitarian support while upholding an uncompromised commitment to human rights and non-recognition. Existing mechanisms, such as channelling humanitarian and financial aid through NGOs, have prevented logistical and financial ties with the de facto authorities. Yet the continuous provision of aid cannot be guaranteed, as it remains threatened by restrictive decrees.

In this environment, a top-down approach might bring limited results due to uneven interpretation of central directives from Kandahar in different areas by regional governors. Therefore, implementing issue-specific arrangements and decentralised monitoring to track progress across provinces could help make aid delivery more stable and predictable. This could be achieved by increased cooperation with NGOs and greater support for local civil society organisations. While such measures cannot eliminate the tensions between humanitarian engagement and human rights concerns, they offer a pragmatic means for the EU to preserve

humanitarian access without undermining its policy of non-recognition and continued support for fundamental rights.

References

- EEAS. (2026). Five years after Kabul takeover, EU support for Afghan people continues. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/five-years-after-kabul-takeover-eu-support-afghan-people-continues_en
- European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations [ECHO]. (2026). Afghanistan. European Commission. https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/where/asia-and-pacific/afghanistan_en
- International Criminal Court. (2025a, July 8). Situation in Afghanistan: ICC Pre-Trial Chamber II issues arrest warrants for Haibatullah Akhundzada and Abdul Hakim Haqqani. <https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/situation-afghanistan-icc-pre-trial-chamber-ii-issues-arrest-warrants-haibatullah-akhundzada>
- International Criminal Court. (2025b, January 23). Prosecution's application under article 58 for a warrant of arrest against Haibatullah Akhundzada. <https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/CourtRecords/0902ebd180a915c7.pdf>
- ReliefWeb. (n.d.). Afghanistan: Drought – Feb 2021. Retrieved August 20, 2026, from <https://reliefweb.int/disaster/dr-2021-000022-afg>
- UN News. (2024, December 31). 'Absolutely the wrong path,' Türk warns against Afghanistan's ban on women in NGOs. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/12/1158651>
- UN Women. (2026b, May 26). UN Women Afghanistan statement on Decree No. 18 issued by the de facto authorities. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/statement/2026/05/un-women-afghanistan-statement-on-decree-no-18-issued-by-the-de-facto-authorities>